
In four chapters (plus Introduction and Conclusion, chapters 1 and 6) Mordechai Nisan analyzes four layers of human reality: religion at the foundation, above it philosophy, then culture, then war (p. 1). In Nisan’s worldview politics, as superstructure, is simply a by-product, a sub-set of basic factors, i.e. the religious, philosophical, and cultural attributes of a people. It is also identified as “the rudiments and mental building-blocks of life”.

Although the author tends to lessen the importance of politics, the latter enjoys a prominent place in the titles of chapters two and three. Chapter two, “The Dialectical Relationship of Islam with Judaism and Its Political Significance”, is on religion. It analyses different angles of relationship between Islam and Judaism, between Muslims and Jews. The author stresses how Oriental Christians, Zoroastrian Persians, paganistic Berbers, Turks, Caucasians, Central Asians, Mongols, some Chinese, black Africans, and many other groups were attracted to Islam. “But the Jews overwhelmingly rejected Islam, standing firm against the religious challenge and socio-political temptation” (p. 8). This resistance was only temporary, because in the logic of zero sum game, there cannot be two parallel evolving truths. “The Jews (...) had to be reduced so that the Muslims could rise”, affirms Nisan (p. 11). His lecture of Jewish-Muslim relations and Judaism's place in the Qur’ān contrast sharply with the text of the Holy Book in regard to the treatment of “People of the Book”. In spite of the author’s numerous claims in respect to the Jewish family connections of many influential Muslims, including “the early caliphs of Islam of Jewish origin”, “the Judaic foundations in the koranic narratives”, religious rituals such as fast borrowed from the Jewish practice, and “the influence of Judaism upon the origins and development of law and custom in the religion of Islam” (p. 16), it is not quite clear from the text why Muslims should persecute Jews, their cousins? Mordechai Nisan who tries to minimize “the sanctity of Jerusalem” for Muslims by opposing the Holy City to Mecca, “Islamic lore fosters the sanctity of Mecca above that of Jerusalem” (p. 22), refers to the attachment of Muslims to the City as a sign of “Islam’s religious imperialism” and Islam’s appropriation of Judaic “prophets and personalities, principles and places” (p. 23). On the question of religious universalism, the author recognizes that Judaism is “a national religion”, but “Islam is a universal religion (...) beyond ethnic, racial, national, and linguistic differences” (p. 24). Not far after this national versus universal dichotomy which could have serious ramifications for the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and the state of Israel’s claim on the right of return for all Jews, Nisan rectifies his historical comprehension of the issue: “Moving between particularism and universalism, the two aspects in Judaism are interwoven yet disparate ... Judaism’s particularity maintains a universal purpose, because the ‘chosen people’ is a ‘world people’ in its global dispersion and mission ...” (p. 25). The last section of this chapter is devoted to the creation of Israel as a state in 1948.
and to the Palestinians who became the ‘Jews’ of the Middle East (p. 34). In an attempt to rewrite history, the author pretends that the Arab-Israeli conflict is based “on the historic religious rivalry inflaming the two communities” (p. 370). It is interesting to indicate that for Nisan, at least in this section of his book, the Arabs and Muslims are identical. In other words, there is no such thing as the Christian component of Arab and/or Palestinian entity. Confusion in the statements aggravates when, in the end, after repeatedly accusing Islam and the Qur’an to be a source for legitimizing the “brutal” treatment of Jews in the Muslim lands, the author writes: “Notwithstanding the Muslim war against the Jews, [Arab states versus Israel?] the Qur’an explicitly recognizes the right of the Jewish people to divinely granted land of their forefathers. The Muslims may persist in repudiating the Bible, but they could reasonably submit to the validity of their Koran” (p. 39). One is completely at a loss what the author is referring to.

In chapter three, “Philosophy, An Ontological and Political Inquiry into Judaism, Christianity, and Islam”, Nisan states that civilizations establish their primary identity as organized ventures in history by reflecting principles from among the three ultimate possibilities: to do, to have, to be. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam reflect the three categories, doing, having, and being (p. 45). Mixing religion (doctrine) and political ideology (Zionism), he lavishes praise on Zionism for having done wonders with the historic Jewish vision of return and renewal in Eretz-Israel. Praise of Zionism assumes a strange meaning when the author confirms that “many Israeli children virtually grew up without their mothers. The child was denied love that would otherwise be mediated from the ‘being’ of the mother” (p. 55). Nisan’s statement on Islam is not very clear. On the one hand, he says: “The God of Being is the theological centerpiece at the core of the Koran”. Then he adds: “Allah however is not known by His ‘Being’ or essence because of the inability of human being to comprehend the ultimate otherness of the single divinity” (p. 70). After mixing philosophy and theology by comparing Greek philosophical thinking and Islam, the author enters in the unsettled Sunni-Shi‘ite division. On ‘the sanctified Imam’ ‘who approximates Jesus Christ in the messianic sense’, he elaborates on ‘the virtually divinic quality of the Imam’ al-Mahdi! (p. 72).

In chapter four, “Culture: Western Travellers in the Muslim Lands of the Middle East: The ‘Orientalism’ Debate Revisited”, Mordechai Nisan analysis the controversial fascination and denial relationship between Occident and Orient. Recalling East-West historical relations and the depth of their respective contradictory worldviews, the author shows how the study of Arabic and Islam did not contribute markedly to Western recognition and appreciation of eastern cultural treasures. In keeping with the dominant Western scorn, “Arab hatred, Turkish cruelty, Muslim fanaticism”, Mark Twain makes his biased views known blatantly. Denouncing the Muslims’ hatred and violence directed against Christians, Twain says: “I never disliked a Chinaman as I do these Turks and Arabs”. It seems that Christians’ defence was only a pretext, used by Twain for another purpose. Nisan shares Twain’s “simple visible truth” about Palestine, a “naked, treeless land”, neglected by disinterested Muslims, as a historical proof that without its Jewish sons and daughters the Land of Israel would never recover its fertility and vitality as a
national home again. In this (Muslim) “world of hate and moral depravity”, Twain and Nisan believe that “the Zionists remarkably would bring together and invigorate the neglected land and the chosen people” (p. 109). No need to recall the prefabricated character of a distorted image of Palestine by the Twain, Zionist movement, and Nisan trio who seem to deliberately present a confusing definition of Muslims; they are Arabs, Turks, Persians, Orientals, etc. Like other passages in his monograph, Nisan mixes politics, religion, philosophy, fiction, and impressions in order to legitimize the creation of Israel in Palestine. This example, like many others in the book, shows the centrality of politics, politics which tends to exploit religion, culture, and philosophy for its purpose. Nisan concludes this chapter by attacking the US State Department’s Arabists who have pro-Arab and anti-Jewish/Zionist bias (p. 122). He does not explain why, in spite of this formidable lobby, the Arabists failed to effectively promote the Arab interest and prevent Israel’s creation.

The fifth chapter is on ‘war’ and has a provocative title: “The Islamic Assault on the West and Israel”. In contrast with the author’s negative presentation of Muslims, he is very laudatory towards “the children of Israel” whom he qualifies as the “holy people”, “special people of God”, “chosen people with spiritual and moral superiority over other peoples in history”. Christians also have love for their enemies. As for Islam, Nisan presents a narrow definition of *jihād* and concludes that Muslims, their prophet as well as their God are violent. “The Islamic test for perfection and performance binds religion with war, invoking self-sacrifice in order to conquer the enemy and establish Muhammad’s faith as triumphant in the world”. (p. 128). Evoking journalistic/sensational understanding of the message, he forgets that in Islam there exist two kinds of *jihād*, the *jihād* greater which is a perpetual striving for self-purification, and the lesser *jihād*, which is a defensive struggle to protect the Community against outside aggression. Nisan, who does not analyze the profound reasons behind the popular revolt against Israeli occupation of the Arab lands, colonial domination, and tyranny in Muslim countries, prefers a simplistic explanation. He attributes this popular behaviour to “the militaristic culture embedded in the religion of Islam [that] elevated warfare to the pinnacle of faith” (p. 135). *Identity and Civilization: Essays on Judaism, Christianity and Islam* is another and a new version of Samuel Huntington’s clashology of civilizations.

In conclusion, Mordechai Nisan’s book is an attempt to revise the history of religions by reinforcing the old idea of Jewish persecution at Muslim hands. It presents a very violent and negative picture of Islam and Muslims. It fails to explain the causes of Islamic success around the world. Unfortunately, the monograph does not contribute to a better understanding of the Middle Eastern problems. It diminishes the importance of colonial forces’ historical intervention in the affairs and exonerates the continued Israeli occupation of Arab lands.

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